Arahants, Bodhisattvas, and Buddhas

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Abstract

For centuries, Theravada's arahant ideal and Mahayana's bodhisattva ideal have served as lightning rods of contention between these two schools of Buddhism. In fact, the author argues, a healthy and integrated Buddhist practice requires respect of both ideals.

1 Competing Buddhist Ideals

The arahant ideal and the bodhisattva ideal are often considered the respective guiding ideals of Theravāda Buddhism and Mahāyāna Buddhism. This assumption is not entirely correct, for the Theravāda tradition has absorbed the bodhisattva ideal into its framework and thus recognizes the validity of both arahantship and Buddhahood as objects of aspiration. It would therefore be more accurate to say that the arahant ideal and the bodhisattva ideal are the respective guiding ideals of Early Buddhism and Mahāyāna Buddhism. By "Early Buddhism" I do not mean the same thing as Theravāda Buddhism that exists in the countries of southern Asia. I mean the type of Buddhism embodied in the archaic Nikāyas of Theravāda Buddhism and in the corresponding texts of other schools of Indian Buddhism that did not survive the general destruction of Buddhism in India.

It is important to recognize that these ideals, in the forms that they have come down to us, originate from different bodies of literature stemming from different periods in the historical development of Buddhism. If we don't take this fact into account and simply compare these two ideals as described in Buddhist canonical texts, we might assume that the two were originally expounded by the historical Buddha himself, and we might then suppose that the Buddha — living and teaching in the Ganges plain in the 5th century B.C. — offered his followers a choice between them, as if to say: "This is the arahant ideal, which has such and such features; and that is the bodhisattva ideal, which has such and such features. Choose whichever one you like."[1] The Mahāyāna sūtras, such as the Mahāprajñā-pāramitā Sūtra and the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra (the Lotus Sūtra), give the impression that the Buddha did teach both ideals. Such sūtras, however, certainly are not archaic. To the contrary, they are relatively late attempts to schematize the different types of Buddhist practice that had evolved over a period of roughly four hundred years after the Buddha's parinirvāṇa.

The most archaic Buddhist texts — the Pali Nikāyas and their counterparts from other early schools (some of which have been preserved in the Chinese Āgamas and the Tibetan Kanjur) — depict the ideal for the Buddhist disciple as the arahant. The Mahāyāna sūtras, composed a few centuries later in a Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, depict the ideal for the Mahāyāna follower as the bodhisattva. Now some people argue that because the arahant is the ideal of Early Buddhism, while the bodhisattva is the ideal of later Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Mahāyāna must be a more advanced or highly developed type of Buddhism, a more ultimate teaching compared to the simpler, more basic teaching of the Nikāyas. That is indeed an attitude common among Mahāyānists, which I will call "Mahāyāna elitism." An opposing attitude common among conservative advocates of the Nikāyas rejects all later developments in the history of Buddhist thought as deviation and distortion, a fall away from the "pristine purity" of the ancient teaching. I call this attitude "Nikāya purism." Taking the arahant ideal alone as valid, Nikāya purists reject the bodhisattva ideal, sometimes forcefully and even aggressively.

I have been seeking a point of view that can do justice to both perspectives, that of the Nikāyas and the early Mahāyāna sūtras, a point of view that can accommodate their respective strengths without falling into a soft and easy syncretism, without blotting out conceptual dissonances between them, without abandoning faithfulness to the historical records – yet one which also recognizes that these records are by no means crystal clear and are unlikely to be free of bias. This task has by no means been easy. It is much simpler to adopt either a standpoint of "Nikāya purism" or one of "Mahāyāna elitism" and hold to it without flinching. The

[1] There is also a third model of the Buddhist spiritual life, that of the *paccekabuddha* or *pratyekabuddha*. The paccekabuddha is similar in many respects to the disciple arahant, except that whereas the disciple arahant attains enlightenment under the guidance of a Buddha, the paccekabuddha gains enlightenment without any outside guidance. Otherwise, the combination of qualities that constitute this type is essentially the same. In the literature of the Buddhist systems, we often read of three types of enlightened ones — Pali: *sāvakas*, *paccekabuddhas*, and *sammā sambuddhas* (= Skt: *śrāvakas*, *pratyekabuddhas*, and *samyak sambuddhas*) — and of the three vehicles that lead to these attainments: the *śrāvaka-yāna*, the *pratyekabuddha-yāna*, and the *bodhisattva-yāna*.

problem with these two standpoints, however, is that both are obliged to neglect facts that are discomforting to their respective points of view.

Although I am ordained as a Theravāda Buddhist monk, in this paper I am not going to be defending the opinions of any particular school of Buddhism or trying to uphold a sectarian point of view. For six years, I have lived in Chinese Mahāyāna monasteries, and my understanding of Buddhism has been particularly enriched by my contact with the teachings of the Chinese scholar-monk Master Yinshun (1906-2005) and his most senior living pupil, Master Renjun, the founder of Bodhi Monastery in New Jersey. My first purpose is to draw out from the texts what the texts say explicitly, and also what they imply, about these two competing ideals of the Buddhist life. At the end, when I draw my conclusions, I will clearly state them as such, and they will be entirely my own. Sometimes I will not draw conclusions but instead raise questions, pointing to problems in the history of Buddhism that I am acutely aware of but unfortunately cannot resolve. It is quite possible that what I consider a nuanced and balanced point of view will draw fire from partisan advocates on both sides of the divide. However, from the standpoint of my present understanding, I have no choice but to take this risk.

2 Looking to the Buddha as the ideal

I want to start by making what I think is an extremely important but seldom made observation, namely, that both types of texts — the Nikāyas and Āgamas on the one hand, and the Mahāyāna sūtras on the other — are in a sense looking to the Buddha himself as the ideal. That is, it is not the case that Early Buddhism overlooks the Buddha and instead takes his disciples as the ideal, while Mahāyāna Buddhism comes to the rescue and recovers what the "Hīnayānists" had missed, namely, the inspirational impetus imparted by the Buddha himself. Rather, I want to maintain that followers of both forms of Buddhism — and the authoritative texts from which both forms of Buddhism develop — are looking upon the Buddha as the exemplary figure that a true follower of the Dharma should emulate.

The two differ primarily in so far as they view the Buddha from two different perspectives. I'll use an analogy to illustrate this and then provide a fuller explanation. The Buddha Hall here at our monastery has two entrances situated on either side of the Buddha image. If one looks at the image after entering the hall by the west entrance, the Buddha appears in one way; the angle highlights certain characteristics of the face. If one looks at the image after entering the hall by the east entrance, the Buddha appears in a different way; the angle highlights other characteristics of the face. I see this as a fitting simile for the way the two traditions view the Buddha and his enlightenment. I see both the early suttas of the Nikāyas and Āgamas, and the Mahāyāna sūtras, to be giving us different perspectives on the Buddha and his enlightenment and thus as offering different understandings of what it means to be a true follower of the Buddha.

To briefly characterize these perspectives, I would say that the Nikāyas and Āgamas give us a "historical-realistic perspective" on the Buddha, while the Mahāyāna sūtras give us a "cosmic-metaphysical perspective." By using these terms, I'm not intending to use the Nikāyas to trump the Mahāyāna sūtras — though naturally I hold they are more likely to be closer to the Buddha's own verbal teachings. Rather, I'm just trying to characterize the standpoints that they use to look at the Buddha and interpret his significance for the world. These two perspectives then define what the Buddha accomplished through his enlightenment. When we take the historical-realistic perspective, the Buddha became an arahant. However, though being an arahant, he was what we might call "an arahant with differences"; he was, moreover not simply an arahant with a few incidental differences, but an arahant whose differences eventually elevated him to a distinct level, the Bhagavā, a world teacher, one who towered above all the other arahants. These differences opened the door, so to speak, to the "cosmic-metaphysical perspective" on the Buddha as a way to understand what accounted for these differences. Once this door was opened up, the Buddha was viewed as the one who brought to consummation the long bodhisattva career extending over countless eons, in which he sacrificed himself in various ways, many times, for the good of others: this is the cosmic aspect of that perspective. Again, he was viewed as the one who arrived at ultimate truth, the Tathāgata who has come from Suchness (tathā + āgata) and gone to Suchness (tathā + gata), and yet who abides nowhere: this is the metaphysical aspect of that perspective. This cosmic-metaphysical perspective then became characteristic of the Mahāyāna.

3 The perspective of the Nikāyas

As I indicated above, there is a sense in which both the Nikāyas and the Mahāyāna sūtras alike take it as their project to demonstrate what is required of one who wants "to follow in the footsteps of the Master." But they take up this project from these two different standpoints. I will explain first the standpoint of the Nikāyas and then the standpoint of the Mahāyāna sūtras.

The Nikāyas begin with our common human condition and depict the Buddha *as starting from within this same human condition*. That is, for the Nikāyas, the Buddha starts off as a human being sharing fully in our humanity. He takes birth among us as a man subject to the limitations of human life. As he grows up, he is

confronted with inevitable old age, sickness, and death, which reveal to him the deep misery that perpetually lies hidden behind youth, health, and life, mocking our brightest joys. Like many other thoughtful Indians of his time, he seeks a way to liberation from life's afflictions — and as he tells it, he seeks liberation primarily for *himself*, not with some grand thought in mind of saving the world. He goes forth, becomes an ascetic, and engages in a relentless struggle for deliverance. Finally, he finds the correct path and attains the bliss of nirvāṇa. After his attainment, he considers whether he should make the path available to others, and *his first impulse is to remain silent.* Note that he *almost* follows the route of a paccekabuddha. It is only when the deity Brahmā Sahampati entreats him that he takes up the task of teaching this path to others. His major achievement is to have attained nirvāṇa, the state free from all bondage and suffering. This is the great goal, the final end of all spiritual striving, the peace beyond all the anxiety and unrest of the ordinary human condition. By teaching the path, he makes this goal available to others, and those who follow the path reach the same goal that he himself attained.

The Buddha is the first of the arahants, while those who reach the goal by following his path also become arahants. In the verse of homage to the Buddha, it is said: "*Iti pi so Bhagavā Arahaṃ...* — The Blessed One is an arahant..." Shortly after his enlightenment, while walking to Benares to meet the five monks, a wanderer stopped the Buddha and asked who he was. The Buddha replied: "I am the arahant in the world, I am the supreme teacher" (MN 26/I 171). So the Buddha first of all declares himself to be an arahant. The defining mark of an arahant is the attainment of nirvāṇa in this present life. The word "arahant" was not coined by the Buddha but was current even before he appeared on the Indian religious scene. The word is derived from a verb arahati, meaning "to be worthy," and thus means a person who is truly worthy of veneration and offerings. Among Indian spiritual seekers in the Buddha's time, the word was used to denote a person who had attained the ultimate goal, for this is what made one worthy of veneration and offerings. From the perspective of the Nikāyas, the ultimate goal — the goal in strict doctrinal terms — is nirvāṇa, and the goal in human terms is arahantship, the state of a person who has attained nirvāṇa in this present life. The Buddha's enlightenment is significant because it marked the first realization of nirvāṇa within this historical epoch. We might say that the Buddha rises above the horizon of history as an arahant; in his historical manifestation he dawns upon human consciousness as an arahant.

After attaining enlightenment, the Buddha makes the path to enlightenment available to many others. Enlightenment is valued because it is the gateway to the ultimate freedom of nirvāṇa. In the Nikāyas, we find several descriptions of the process by which the Buddha attained enlightenment, and there are corresponding texts that describe the disciples' enlightenment in the same terms. In MN 26, the Buddha says that "being myself subject to birth, aging, sickness, and death, I attained the unborn, ageless, sickness-free, deathless, supreme security from bondage, Nibbāna" (MN I 167) A few months later, when he taught the Dhamma to his first five disciples, he says of them: "When those monks were instructed and guided by me, being subject to birth, aging, sickness, and death, they attained the unborn, ageless, sickness-free, deathless, supreme security from bondage, Nibbāna" (MN I 173). Thus the attainment of these monks is described in exactly the same terms that the Buddha uses to describe his own attainment. Again, in several suttas — MN 4, MN 19, MN 36 — the Buddha describes his attainment of enlightenment as involving two main stages. First comes the attainment of the four jhānas. Second, during the three parts of the night, he realized three higher knowledges: the recollection of past lives, the knowledge of the passing away and rebirth of beings according to their karma, and the knowledge of the destruction of the āsavas, the primordial defilements that sustain the round of rebirths. Now several suttas in the same collection, the Majjhima Nikāya, describe the enlightenment of the disciple in just this way: attainment of the four jhānas and realization of the three higher knowledges; see e.g. MN 27, MN 51, MN 53. While it is true that not all disciples attained the jhānas and most probably didn't attain the first two higher knowledges, these seemed to mark a certain ideal standard within the early Sangha — a standard that the Buddha and the great arahants shared in common.

At SN 22:58, the Buddha says that both the Tathāgata and the arahant disciple are alike in being liberated from the five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness. So, what is the difference between them? The answer the Buddha gives points to temporal priority as the distinction: the Tathāgata is the originator of the path, the producer of the path, the one who declares the path. He is the knower of the path, the discoverer of the path, the expounder of the path. His disciples dwell following the path and become possessed of it afterwards. But they both walk the same path and attain the same final goal.

Thus the Buddha is distinguished from the arahant disciples, not by some categorical difference in their respective attainments, but by his role: he is the first one in this historical epoch to attain liberation, and he serves as the incomparable guide in making known the way to liberation. He has skills in teaching that even the most capable of his disciples cannot match, but with regard to their world-transcending attainments, both the Buddha and the arahants are '*buddho*', "enlightened," in that they have comprehended the truths that should be comprehended. They are both '*nibbuto*', in that they have extinguished the defilements and thereby attained the peace of nirvāṇa. They are both '*suvimutto*', fully liberated. They have fully understood the truth of suffering; they have abandoned craving, the origin of suffering; they have realized nirvāṇa, the cessation of suffering; and they have completed the practice of the noble eightfold path, the way leading to the cessation of

suffering.

As the first to accomplish all these worthy achievements, the Buddha fulfills two functions. First, he serves as an example, the supreme example; almost every aspect of his life is exemplary, but above all, his very person demonstrates the possibility of attaining perfect freedom from all the fetters of the mind, complete release from suffering, release from the pitfalls of birth and death. Second, as aforesaid, he serves as the guide, the one who knows the path and can teach it in its most intricate details. As the guide, he constantly exhorts his disciples to make a dedicated effort to attain the ultimate goal, nirvāṇa. He admonishes them to strive as diligently as a man whose turban was on fire would strive to put out the fire. The fires of the human heart are greed, hatred, and delusion; their extinction is nirvāṇa. Those who extinguish greed, hatred, and delusion are arahants.

4 How the Buddha is distinguished from other arahants

Nevertheless, it would hardly be correct to say that temporal priority is the only thing that distinguishes the Buddha from the arahants. To bring out the difference, I want to take two stock formulas that occur many times in the texts, one for the Buddha and one for the arahants. I already quoted the opening of the Buddha formula; now let me take it in full: "The Blessed One is an arahant, a perfectly enlightened one, possessed of true knowledge and conduct, an exalted one, a knower of the world, unsurpassed trainer of persons to be tamed, teacher of devas and humans, enlightened, the Blessed One."

There are nine epithets here. Of these nine, four are also used for arahant disciples: arahant, possessed of true knowledge and conduct, an exalted one, enlightened; five are used exclusively for the Buddha: perfectly enlightened one, knower of the world, unsurpassed trainer of persons to be tamed, teacher of devas and humans, the Blessed One. Note that of these five, two (unsurpassed trainer of persons to be tamed, teacher of devas and humans) explicitly refer to the Buddha's significance for others, while, as I understand it, this aspect is also implied by the word "Bhagavā." Even the epithets signifying knowledge are intended to show that he is a reliable authority; that is, by reason of his wisdom or knowledge, he is someone whom others can trust as a source of guidance. So when the Buddha is designated a *sammā sambuddha*, "a perfectly enlightened one," this highlights not only the fullness of his enlightenment, but his authority and reliability as a spiritual teacher.

The formula for the arahant reads thus: "Here a monk is an arahant, one whose taints are destroyed, who has lived the spiritual life, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, reached his own goal, utterly destroyed the fetters of existence, one completely liberated through final knowledge." Now all these epithets are true for the Buddha as well, but the Buddha is not described in this way; for these terms emphasize the attainment of one's own liberation, and the Buddha is extolled, not primarily as the one who has attained his own liberation, but as the one who opens the doors of liberation for others. That is, even in the archaic suttas of the Nikāyas, an "other-regarding" significance is already being subtly ascribed to the Buddha's status that is not ascribed to the arahant.

While the content of the Buddha's enlightenment, according to the Nikāya suttas, does not qualitatively differ from that of other arahants, it plays a different role in what we might call the grand cosmic scheme of salvation. The Buddha's enlightenment has an essentially "other-directed" component built into it from the start. By virtue of attaining enlightenment, the Buddha serves as the great teacher who "opens the doors to the Deathless." AN I, xiii,1 says he is the one person who arises in the world for the welfare of the world, out of compassion for the world, for the good of devas and human beings. MN 19 compares him to a kind man who leads a herd of deer (signifying sentient beings) from a place of danger to a place of safety; MN 34 compares him to a wise cowherd who leads his cows (i.e., the noble disciples) safely across the river. According to MN 35, the Buddha is honored by other arahants because he is one who, having attained enlightenment himself, teaches the Dhamma for the sake of enlightenment; having attained peace, he teaches for the sake of peace; having attained nirvāṇa, he teaches for the sake of nirvāṇa (MN I 235). He is perfect in all respects, and the most important of his perfections is his ability to teach the Dharma in ways that are best suited to the capacities of those who come to him for guidance. His teaching is always exactly suited to the capacities of those who seek his help, and when they follow his instructions, they receive favorable results, whether it be merely the gain of faith or the attainment of liberation.

Other arahants can certainly teach, and many do teach groups of disciples. Nevertheless, as teachers they do not compare with the Buddha. This is so in at least two respects: First, the Dhamma they teach others is one that comes from the Buddha, and thus ultimately the Buddha is the source of their wisdom; and second, their skills in teaching never match in all respects the skills of the Buddha, who is the only one who knows the path in its entirety. The Buddha can function so effectively as a teacher because his attainment of enlightenment — the knowledge of the four noble truths, which brings the destruction of the defilements — brings along the acquisition of several other types of knowledge that are considered special assets of a Buddha. Chief among these, according to the oldest sources, are the ten Tathāgata powers (see MN I 70-71), which include the knowledge of the diverse inclinations of beings (*sattānaṃ nānādhimuttikataṃ yathābhūtaṃ ñāṇaṃ*) and the knowledge of the degree of maturity of the faculties of other beings (*parasattānaṃ parapuggalānaṃ indriyaparopariyattaṃ*

yathābhūtaṃ ñāṇaṃ). Such types of knowledge enable the Buddha to understand the mental proclivities and capacities of any person who comes to him for guidance, and to teach that person in the particular way that will prove most beneficial, taking full account of his or her character and personal circumstances. He is thus "the unsurpassed trainer of persons to be tamed." Whereas arahant disciples are limited in their communicative skills, the Buddha can communicate effectively with beings in many other realms of existence, as well as with people from many different walks of life. This skill singles him out as "the teacher of devas and humans."

Thus we can see the respects in which the Buddha and disciple arahants share certain qualities in common, above all their liberation from all defilements and from all bonds connecting them to the round of rebirths. And we also see how the Buddha is distinguished from his disciples, namely: (1) by the priority of his attainment, (2) by his function as teacher and guide, and (3) by his acquisition of certain qualities and modes of knowledge that enable him to function as teacher and guide. He also has a physical body endowed with thirty-two excellent characteristics and with other marks of physical beauty. These inspire confidence in those who rely on beauty of form.

5 The bodhisattva problem

I said above that each extreme attitude — "Nikāya purism" and "Mahāyāna elitism" — neglects facts that are discomforting to their respective points of view. "Mahāyāna elitism" neglects the fact that in his historical manifestation, so far as we can ascertain through the early records of his teachings, the Buddha did not teach the bodhisattva path, which emerges only in documents that start to appear at least a century after his passing. What the Buddha consistently taught, according to the early records, is the attainment of nirvāṇa by reaching arahantship. The problem besetting "Nikāya purism" is the figure of the Buddha himself; for in the Buddha we meet a person who, while an arahant, did not attain arahantship as the disciple of a Buddha *but as a Buddha*. In the Nikāyas themselves, he is depicted not merely as the first of the arahants, but as one member of a class of beings — the Tathāgatas — who possess unique characteristics that set them apart from all other beings including their arahant disciples. The Nikāyas, moreover, regard the Tathāgatas as supreme in the entire order of sentient beings: "To whatever extent, monks, there are beings, whether footless or with two feet, four feet, or many feet, whether having form or formless, whether percipient or nonpercipient, or neither percipient nor nonpercipient, the Tathāgata, the Arahant, the Perfectly Enlightened One is declared the best among them" (AN 4:34).

Now since the Buddha is distinguished from his liberated disciples in the ways sketched above, it seems almost self-evident that in his past lives he must have followed a preparatory course sufficient to issue in such an exalted state, namely, the course of a bodhisattva. This conclusion is, in fact, a point of agreement common to all Buddhist schools, both those derived from Early Buddhism and those belonging to the Mahāyāna; it also seems to me to be a conclusion required by reflection. According to all Buddhist traditions, to attain the supreme enlightenment of a Buddha requires the forming of a deliberate resolution and the fulfillment of the spiritual perfections, the *pāramis* or *pāramitās*; and it is a bodhisattva who consummates the practice of these perfections. However, the Nikāyas and Āgamas, the most ancient texts, are strangely silent about this very issue.[2] In the Nikāyas, the Buddha does refer to himself as a *bodhisatta* in the period prior to his enlightenment: in his immediately preceding life, when he dwelled in the Tusita heaven, and during the period of his final life, as Gotama of the Sakyan clan, before his enlightenment.[3] But he says nothing to suggest that he had been consciously following a deliberate course of conduct aimed at the attainment of Buddhahood. Moreover, soon after his enlightenment, when the Buddha considered whether or not to teach the Dhamma, he says that he first inclined to "dwell at ease" (*appossukkatāya cittaṃ namati* MN 26/ I 168; Vin I 5), that is, not to teach, which suggests that even after his enlightenment he might not have fulfilled the function of a *sammā sambuddha*, but could have become a *paccekabuddha*.

There are, however, other passages strewn across the Nikāyas that prevent us from drawing the definitive conclusion that the Buddha somehow stumbled upon Buddhahood merely by chance or that his hesitation implied a genuine possibility of choice. These passages suggest, to the contrary, that his attainment of Buddhahood was already prepared for in his previous births. Though they do not say that in his past lives he was deliberately

[2]There is at least one possible exception to this. MĀ 32, the Chinese Āgama parallel to MN 123, states at T I 469c24: "The Blessed One at the time of Kassapa Buddha made his initial vow for the Buddha path and practised the holy life," (I am indebted to Bhikkhu Anālayo for this reference.) The idea suggested at MĀ 32 seems to me very improbable. For in MN 81 (with a parallel at MĀ 132), the potter Ghañikāra, a lay disciple of Kassapa Buddha and a non-returner, is a friend of the brahmin Jotipāla, the bodhisattva who is to become the Buddha Gotama. During the reign of Gotama Buddha, Ghañikāra appears as an arahant dwelling in one of the celestial Pure Abodes. The above statement would imply that in the time that Ghañikāra advanced from the non-returner state to arahantship, the bodhisattva had traversed the entire path to Buddhahood from the first generation of the aspiration to the final fruit of Buddhahood with all its extraordinary knowledges and powers.

[3]Incidentally, in any Middle Indo-Aryan language, the word would be *bodhisatta*. This was Sanskritized as *bodhisattva*, "enlightenment being," and we take this meaning for granted; but the Sanskritized form might be wrong. For MIA *bodhisatta* could also represent Sanskrit *bodhisakta*, meaning "one intent on enlightenment," "one devoted to enlightenment," and this makes better sense than "an enlightenment being."

following a bodhisattva path to attain Buddhahood, the Nikāyas do depict him as dwelling in the Tusita heaven in his immediately past existence (as I noted just above), destined to become a fully enlightened Buddha in his next life as Gotama of the Sakyan clan, and this implies that in his past lives he must have fulfilled the most demanding prerequisites to take on such an exalted role, to become the loftiest and most highly venerated being in all the world. When he descends into his mother's womb, a great measureless light appears in the world surpassing the light of the devas; and such a light appears again at his birth. When he is born, he is first received by deities, and streams of water pour forth from the sky to wash him and his mother. Immediately upon his birth, he takes seven steps and declares himself the best in the world (MN 123/ III 120-23). The gods sing songs of delight, declaring that the bodhisattva has arisen for the welfare and happiness of the human world (Sn 686). Such passages, of course, could be seen as later additions to the Nikāyas, indicative of a stage when the "Buddha legend" was already making inroads upon the most ancient texts. Nevertheless, given the law of cause and result as operating in the spiritual dimensions of the human domain, it seems virtually impossible that anyone could have attained the extraordinary stature of a Buddha without having made a deliberate effort over many lives to reach such a supreme attainment.

Despite such considerations, in the Nikāyas the Buddha is never seen teaching others to enter a bodhisattva path. Whenever he urges his monastic disciples to strive for any goal, it is to strive for arahantship, for liberation, for nirvāṇa. Whenever monastic disciples come to the Buddha, they ask for guidance in following the path to arahantship. The monks that the Buddha praises in the midst of the Sangha are those who have attained arahantship. Lay disciples often attain the three lower stages of liberation, from stream-entry to non-returning; those who lack the potential for world-transcending attainments aim at a heavenly rebirth or for a fortunate rebirth back into the human realm. No mention is ever made, however, of a lay disciple treading the bodhisattva path, much less of a dichotomy between monastic arahants and lay bodhisattvas.

We need not, however, simply take the Nikāyas at face value but can raise questions. Why is it that in the Nikāyas we never find any instance of a disciple coming to the Buddha to ask for guidance in following a bodhisattva path to Buddhahood? And why is the Buddha never seen exhorting his followers to take up the bodhisattva path? The questions themselves seem perfectly legitimate, and I've tried working out several explanations, though without complete success. One explanation is that there were instances when this happened, but they were filtered out by the compilers of the texts because such teachings were not consistent with the teachings aimed at arahantship. This hypothesis seems unlikely because, if discourses on the path to Buddhahood had the imprint of genuine teachings of the Buddha, it is improbable that the monks compiling the texts would have omitted them. Another explanation is that in the earliest phase of Buddhism, the pre-*textual* phase, the Buddha was simply the first arahant who taught the path to arahantship and did not differ significantly from those among his arahant disciples who possessed the three higher types of knowledge and the *iddhis*, the supernormal powers. According to this account, the Nikāyas are the product of several generations of monastic elaboration and thus already show traces of the apotheosis of the Buddha, his elevation to an exalted (but not yet superhuman) status. On this hypothesis, if we could take a time-machine back to the Buddha's own time, we would find that the Buddha differed from the other arahants mainly in the priority of his attainment and in certain skills he possessed as a teacher, but these differences would not be as great as even the old Nikāyas make them out to be. However, this position seems to strip away from the Buddha that which is most distinctive about him: his uncanny ability to reach deep into the hearts of those who came to him for guidance and teach them in the unique way suitable for their characters and situations. This ability betokens a depth of compassion, a spirit of selfless service, that harmonizes better with the later concept of the bodhisattva than with the canonical concept of the arahant as we see it portrayed, for example, in many of the poems of the Theragāthā or the *muni* poems of the Sutta-nipāta.

In the final analysis, I have to confess my inability to provide a perfectly cogent solution to this problem. In view of the fact that in later times so many Buddhists, in Theravāda lands as well as in the Mahāyāna world, have been inspired by the bodhisattva ideal, it is perplexing that no teachings about a bodhisattva path or bodhisattva practices are included in the discourses regarded as coming down from the most archaic period of Buddhist literary history. This remains a puzzle – for me personally, and also, I believe, a puzzle for Buddhist historiography. In any case, the texts that we inherit do not show as steep a difference between the Buddha's "other-regarding" functions and the so-called "self-enlightenment" of the arahants as later tradition makes them out to be. The Nikāyas show sufficient emphasis on altruistic activity aimed at sharing the Dhamma with others; admittedly, though, most of this emphasis comes from the Buddha himself in the form of injunctions to his disciples. Thus, several texts distinguish people into four types: those concerned only with self-good, those concerned only with others' good, those concerned with the good of neither, and those concerned with the good of both; these texts praise as best those who are devoted to the good of both. And what is meant by being devoted to the good of both is practicing the noble eightfold path and teaching others to practice it; observing the five precepts and encouraging others to observe them; working to eliminate greed, aversion, and delusion and encouraging others to eliminate them (AN 4:96-99). In other suttas the Buddha urges all those who know the four foundations of mindfulness to teach their relatives and friends about them; and the same is said about the four factors of stream-entry and the four noble truths (SN 47:48, 55:16-17, 56:26). In the

beginning of his ministry, he exhorts his disciples to go forth and preach the Dharma "out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare, and happiness of devas and human beings" (Vin I 21). Among the important qualities of an outstanding monk are abundant learning and skill in expounding the Dharma, two qualities that are directly relevant to the benefit of others. Also, we must remember that the Buddha established a monastic order bound by rules and regulations designed to make it function as a harmonious community, and these rules often demand the renouncing of self-interest for the sake of the larger whole. Regarding the lay followers, the Buddha praises those who practice for their own good, for the good of others, and for the good of the whole world. Many prominent lay followers converted their colleagues and neighbors to the Dharma and guided them in right practice.

Thus, we can see that while Early Buddhism emphasizes that each person is ultimately responsible for his or her own destiny, holding that no one can purify another or rescue another from the miseries of saṃsāra, it includes an altruistic dimension that distinguished it from most of the other religious systems that flourished alongside it in northern India. This altruistic dimension might be seen as the "seed" from which the bodhisattva doctrine developed. It might thus also be considered one of the elements in ancient Buddhism that contributed to the emergence of the Mahāyāna.

6 The transition towards the full-fledged bodhisattva concept

Perhaps for a full-fledged bodhisattva doctrine to emerge in Buddhism, something more was needed than the conception of the Buddha that we find in the ancient texts of the Nikāyas. Thus the common project of comparing the arahant of the Nikāyas with the bodhisattva figure of the Mahāyāna sūtras may be somewhat misguided. As I see it, one of the factors that underlies the emergence of the full-fledged bodhisattva doctrine was the transformation of the archaic Buddha concept of the Nikāya sūtras into the Buddha figure of Buddhist religious faith and legend. This took place mainly in the age of Sectarian Buddhism, that is, between the phase of Early Buddhism represented by the Nikāyas and the rise of early Mahāyāna Buddhism. During this period, two significant developments of the Buddha concept occurred. First, the number of Buddhas was multiplied; and second, the Buddhas came to be endowed with increasingly more exalted qualities. These developments occurred somewhat differently in the different Buddhist schools, but certain common features united them.

The Nikāyas already mention six Buddhas preceding Gotama and one to follow him, Metteyya (Skt: Maitreya). Now, since cosmic time is without any discernible beginning or conceivable end, the inference was drawn that there must have been even earlier Buddhas, and thus the number of past Buddhas was increased; stories about some of these entered into circulation and brought them to life. Since space was likewise unbounded, with world systems like our own spread out in "the ten directions," some schools posited the *present* existence of Buddhas in other world systems beyond our own — Buddhas still alive whom one might worship and, by means of meditative power, actually see with contemplative vision.

The texts of Sectarian Buddhism increased a Buddha's faculties of knowledge until they eventually ascribed to him nothing short of omniscience. He came to possess numerous miraculous powers. Eighteen special "Buddha-dharmas," not mentioned in the old suttas, were added. Legends and stories entered into circulation describing the wonderful ways he taught and transformed others. Some of these stories are already found in the suttas: the stories of his encounters with the serial killer Angulimāla, the fierce demon Āḷavaka, the poor leper Suppabuddha, the angry brahmin Bhāradvāja. These stories increased exponentially, painting a picture of the Buddha as the incredibly resourceful teacher who redeems from misery and delusion people of every type. He breaks the pride of haughty brahmins; he brings consolation to distraught mothers and wretched widows; he dispels the complacency of proud warriors and beautiful courtesans; he outdoes clever scholars in debates and rival ascetics in feats of supernormal powers; he teaches avaricious millionaires the wonders of generosity; he inspires diligence in heedless monks; he wins the reverence of kings and princes. As Buddhist devotees looked back on their deceased Master and pondered the question of what accounted for his extraordinary greatness, in no long time they realized that what was most outstanding about him was his boundless compassion. Not content with confining his compassionate concern for others to a single life, they saw it as spread out over innumerable lives in the chain of samsaric existence. Their creative imaginations thus gave birth to a vast treasury of stories about births, namely, about the Buddha's previous births. These stories — the Jātakas or Birth Tales — told of how he had prepared himself for his mission as a Buddha by treading the path of a bodhisattva for unimaginable eons.

The keynote of the most memorable of these stories is service and self-sacrifice. It was by serving others and sacrificing himself for their good that the bodhisattva earned the merits and acquired the virtues that entitled him to attain Buddhahood. Thus, in Buddhist thought clear across the schools of Early Buddhism, the altruistic dimension of the Buddha's enlightenment came to the forefront, literally carved in stone — in pillars and monuments stretching from India to Indonesia — and memorialized in stories and poetry. From this perspective, the Buddha's enlightenment was significant, not merely because it opened the path to nirvāṇa for many others, but because it consummated an eons-long career that began with an altruistic motivation and

endured across many eons sustained by an altruistic resolve. During this career, it was held, the bodhisattva qualified himself for Buddhahood by fulfilling certain supreme virtues, the *pāramīs* or *pāramitās*, which now took the place that the factors of the noble eightfold path held in Early Buddhism. This understanding of the Buddha, I must stress, was common to all the schools of Sectarian Buddhism, including the Theravāda.

During the age of Sectarian Buddhism, the Early Buddhist schools came to admit three "vehicles" to enlightenment: the vehicle of the disciple arahant, the *śrāvaka-yāna*, to be taken by the greatest number of disciples; the vehicle of the "solitary enlightened one" who attains realization without a teacher but does not teach, the *pratyekabuddha-yāna*, which is still more difficult; and the vehicle of the aspirant to Buddhahood, the *bodhisattva-yāna*. Once it became widespread in mainstream Indian Buddhism, the idea of the three vehicles was not only taken up by the Mahāyāna but was eventually also absorbed into conservative Theravāda Buddhism. Thus we read in the later Theravāda commentaries, such as those by Ācariya Dhammapāla and others, of the same three yānas or of the three kinds of bodhi: the enlightenment of disciples, of *paccekabuddhas*, and of *sammā sambuddhas*.[4]

7 The emergence of the Mahāyāna as the bodhisattva-vehicle

Now at some point during this period, the altruistic interpretation of the Buddha's enlightenment that culminated in the conception of the bodhisattva path flowed back upon the Buddhist community and, for some members at least, took on a *prescriptive force*. As they reflected deeply on what it meant to be an ideal follower of the Buddha, such Buddhist disciples concluded that to follow in the Buddha's footsteps in the highest sense, it was no longer sufficient simply to follow the noble eightfold path aimed at the attainment of nirvāṇa. This was still seen as a valid option, an option that culminated in liberation for oneself and those one might immediately influence by teaching and example; but, they held, the Buddha himself had aimed at a state that would enable him to promote the welfare and happiness of the hosts of devas and humans. Thus, these thinkers felt, the superior choice, the higher way to follow the Buddha, was to set out on the same quest that the Buddha had set for himself: by taking the vows of a bodhisattva and following the bodhisattva course. This would have marked the emergence of the *bodhisattva-yāna* as a conception of the *ideal* Buddhist way of life, the way binding upon the true follower of the Enlightened One.

This ideal emerged from a different starting point than Early Buddhism, a different visionary background. Whereas Early Buddhism takes (as we saw above) the common human condition as its starting point, and even views the Buddha as beginning as a human being subject to human frailties, early-period Mahāyāna Buddhism takes as its starting point the long-range cosmic background to a Buddha's attainment of Buddhahood. It looks back to his first conception of the *bodhicitta*, his original vows, and his practice of the *pāramitās* over countless lives, and treats these as the paradigm for practice. That is, it sees this process, not merely as a *description* of the path that a Buddha follows, but as a *recommendation* of the path that his true disciples *should follow*; some later versions of Mahāyāna see this as the actualization of a potential for Buddhahood, the *tathāgatagarbha* or "embryo of the Thus-Come One," already embedded deep within us.

We can imagine a period when the *bodhisattva-yāna* had been consciously adopted by a growing number of Buddhists, probably first within small circles of monks, who sought to guide themselves by the sūtras of the Nikāyas or Āgamas and the Jātaka stories dealing with the Buddha's past lives. They were still members of early Buddhist communities and probably had not yet even become conscious of themselves as branching off to form a new tradition. They would not have thought of themselves as "Mahāyāna Buddhists," as we understand the term today, but simply as communities of Buddhists pledged to follow the *bodhisattva-yāna*, which they might have designated the *mahāyāna* simply in the sense that it constituted a "great course" to enlightenment. However, while for some time they may have tried to remain within the fold of mainstream Buddhism, once they began to openly propagate the bodhisattva ideal, they would have found themselves in open confrontation with those who adhered more strictly to the ideas and ideals of the older, well-established sūtras. This confrontation would have heightened their sense of distinctness and thus led to their conscious amalgamation into communities revolving around a new vision of the Buddhist path and goal.

At this point they might have found that the teachings of the Nikāya-Āgama sūtras, which describe the practices needed to attain personal liberation from the round of birth and death, no longer met their needs. They would, of course, still have accepted these teachings as authoritative, since they stemmed directly from the Buddha, but they would also felt the need for scriptures rooted in the same authority that provide detailed teachings about the practices and stages of the bodhisattva path, which aimed at nothing less than perfect Buddhahood. It was to fill this need, presumably, that the Mahāyāna sūtras began to appear on the Indian Buddhist scene. Exactly how these sūtras were first composed and made their appearance is a matter about

[4] I do not think the expressions, "three *yānas*" or "three *bodhis*," are used in the commentaries that can be reliably ascribed to Buddhaghosa, though the idea is already implicit in the acknowledgement of three types of enlightened persons who reach their goals through the accumulation of *pāramīs*.

which contemporary scholarship is still largely in the dark;[5] for all we have at our disposal are Mahāyāna sūtras that are fairly well developed and represent Mahāyāna Buddhism at what we might call "stage two" or even "stage three" of its development. Unfortunately, we cannot use them to peer back into the very earliest stage of the Mahāyāna, when these sūtras were first starting to take shape, or even past that period, when Mahāyānist ideas were still in the stage of gestation, seeking articulation without yet having come to expression in any literary documents.

Now there are two attitudes noticeable in the early Mahāyāna sūtras regarding the older paradigm based on the arahant ideal. One is to affirm it as valid for the typical Buddhist follower, while extolling the bodhisattva path as the appropriate vehicle for the person of excellent aspirations. This attitude treats the old arahant ideal, or the *śrāvaka* paradigm, with respect and admiration, while lavishing the greatest praise on the bodhisattva ideal. When this attitude is adopted, the two paths — together with the path to the enlightenment of a *pratekabuddha* — become three valid vehicles, the choice of which is left to the disciple. The other attitude seen in the Mahāyāna sūtras is one of devaluation and denigration. It involves not simply comparing the path to arahantship unfavorably with the bodhisattva path (for all the Buddhist schools recognized the superiority of the bodhisattva's way to Buddhahood), but belittling and ridiculing the old ideal of ancient Buddhism, sometimes treating it almost with contempt. The first attitude is seen in such early Mahāyāna texts as the Ugraparipṛcchā Sūtra.[6] Over time, however, the second attitude became more prominent until we find such texts as the Vimalakīrti Sūtra, which ridicules the great disciples of the Buddha like Sāriputta, Upāli, and Puṇṇa Mantāniputta; or the Aśokadattā Sūtra, in which a young girl bodhisattva refuses to show respect to the great arahant disciples; or the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra, which compares the nirvāṇa of the arahants to the wages of a hired laborer. In some sūtras, it is even said that arahants feel shame and reproach themselves for attaining arahantship, or that arahants are conceited and deluded. It is indisputable that the Mahāyāna sūtras often have passages of great depth and beauty. I believe, however, that a more conciliatory attitude towards the older form of Buddhism would have made the task of achieving harmony among different Buddhist schools today much easier than it is. Within the Theravāda school, the Mahāyāna teachings on the bodhisattva ideal and the practice of the pāramitās were incorporated into the later commentaries, but never in a way that involved denigration of the older, more historical Buddhist goal of arahantship.

8 Breaking down old stereotypes

In this part of my presentation I want to use this historical analysis to break down old stereotypes and the prejudices that have divided followers of the two main forms of Buddhism. From there we can work towards a healthy rather than competitive integration of the two. The two main stereotypes are as follows:

1. Arahants, and Theravādin Buddhists, are concerned exclusively with their own salvation as opposed to the benefit of others; they have a narrow fixation on personal liberation because they are "fearful of birth and death" and therefore have little compassion for others and don't undertake activities intended to benefit them.

2. Followers of the bodhisattva ideal, and Mahāyāna Buddhists, are so much involved in social projects aimed at benefiting others that they don't take up the practice that the Buddha assigned to his disciples, namely, the taming of the mind and the development of insight. They have overwhelmed themselves with social duties and forsaken meditation practice.

I'll take the two stereotypes in order, and begin with the ancient arahants. Although the Buddha was the pioneer in discovering the path to liberation, this does not mean that his arahant disciples just selfishly reaped the benefits of the path and did nothing for others. To the contrary, in the suttas we can see that many of them became great teachers in their own right who were capable of guiding others towards liberation. The best known among them are Sāriputta, Mahākaccāna, Moggāllana, and Ānanda. There was the monk Puṇṇa who went to the barbarian Sunāparanta country, risking his life to teach the Dhamma to the people there. There were such nuns as Khemā and Dhammadinnā, who were outstanding preachers, Paṭācārā, who was a master of the discipline, and many others. For four hundred years, the Buddhist texts were preserved orally, transmitted from teachers to pupils, and obviously there had to be thousands of monks and nuns who dedicated their lives to learning the texts and teaching them to pupils, all for the purpose of preserving the good Dhamma and Vinaya in the world.

The example established by the Buddha's great arahant disciples has been the model for the followers of the arahant ideal throughout history. While those who pursue this ideal do not make such lofty vows as do

[5] But see the symposium on Early Mahāyāna in *The Eastern Buddhist*, Vol. 35 (2003), especially Paul Harrison, "Mediums and Messages: Reflections on the Production of Mahāyāna Sūtras," pp. 115-151.

[6] See Jan Nattier, *A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path according to The Inquiry of Ugra* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), offers a translation of this sutra along with an extremely illuminating introduction. Of special relevance to the present paper are chapters 4, 7, and 8 of the introduction.

followers of the bodhisattva ideal, they are inspired by the example of the Buddha and his great disciples to work for the spiritual and moral uplift of others to the best of their ability: by teaching, by example, and by direct spiritual influence, inspired by the Buddha's command to "wander forth for the welfare of the multitude, for the happiness of the multitude, out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare, and happiness of devas and human beings."

The life pattern of a follower of the arahant ideal conforms in many respects to that of the Buddha. I take as an example those who may not have actually achieved arahantship itself but are practicing within this framework and have reached some higher stage of spiritual accomplishment. In the early part of their lives, they may go to a forest monastery or to a meditation center to train under a competent teacher. Then, after reaching a sufficient level of maturity to practice on their own, they will go into solitude to develop their practice for a period that might last five years or longer. Then, at a certain point, their achievements will start to exert an influence on others. They might start to teach on their own initiative, or their teacher might ask them to begin teaching, or prospective students might realize they have achieved some superior state and request guidance from them. From this point on, they will begin to teach, and in time they might become well respected spiritual teachers, with many disciples and many centers under their guidance.

In contrast to the image of "selfish personal liberation" that Mahāyāna Buddhists ascribe to the arahants and those following the *śrāvaka-yāna*, the most eminent masters of the Theravāda tradition often teach thousands of disciples, monastic and laity. Some may work ten or more hours a day. For example, in recent times, Ven. Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma established hundreds of meditation centers in Burma and presided over the Sixth Buddhist Council; Ajahn Chah had a main monastery and many branch monasteries in Thailand, one dedicated to foreign monks; Ven. Pa Auk Sayadaw, U Pandita, and Bhante Gunaratana — present-day Theravāda meditation teachers — travel throughout the world conducting courses; Ajahn Maha Boowa, at age 93 reputed to be an arahant, supports sixty hospitals in Thailand, and regularly visits them to console patients and distribute medicines. Those who are not competent to function as meditation teachers might still become masters of Buddhist texts and philosophy and devote themselves selflessly to guiding others in understanding the Dhamma, whether by training monks and nuns, by giving instructions to the laity, by teaching in Buddhist monastic schools, or by preaching in Buddhist temples.

From the Theravāda perspective, while social work is certainly praiseworthy, of all benefits that can be conferred on others, the most precious benefit is the gift of the Dharma. Thus the quest for liberation as an arahant is not a purely private, personal undertaking, but has a far-reaching influence and can have an impact upon a whole society. In the traditional Theravāda countries, before the corrupting influence of the West set in, the whole life of the community revolved around the Dhamma. The monks who meditated in the forests and mountains were the inspiration and model for the society; those who preached and taught in the villages helped to transmit the Dhamma to the people. The lay community, from the king down to the villagers, saw their principal duty to be the support of the Sangha. So the supreme goal of arahantship became the focal point for an entire social system inspired and sustained by devotion to the Dhamma.

Those who seek the goal of nirvāṇa do not wait until they become arahants before they start helping others. Within this system, giving is regarded as the foundation for all other virtues; it is the first basis of merit and the first of the ten pāramis. Thus the Pali scriptures, and monks in their preaching, encourage people to give to the best of their ability. Lay people support the Sangha with their simple material needs of food, robes, dwellings, and medicines. They also give generously to the poor and disadvantaged. In Sri Lanka, for example, blood donation campaigns are common on Buddhist holidays, and many people donate their eyes to eye banks and their bodily organs for medical research after their death. I learned recently that in Sri Lanka, more than 200 monks have donated kidneys, without any thought of remuneration or any other personal benefit, solely for the privilege of giving a bodily organ. Monks with knowledge of the Dhamma and skill in speaking become preachers and teachers. Those with managerial skills might become administrators of monasteries. The few who are strongly motivated to make the effort to win liberation in this very life dedicate their energy to meditation in forest hermitages. Accomplished meditation teachers will devote their time to teaching meditation and will also try to find time to develop their own practice. Sometimes they have to delay their own practice in order to fulfill their teaching duties.

So much for misunderstandings concerning the arahant ideal, and now for the *bodhisattva ideal*: I think it would be an oversimplification to equate the pursuit of the bodhisattva ideal with engagement in social service and to assume that a bodhisattva forgoes all training on the path to liberation. In my understanding, the foundation of the bodhisattva path is the arising of the *bodhicitta* (*bodhicittotpāda*), the aspiration to supreme enlightenment. This usually arises only through diligent training in meditation. According to the authoritative sources on Mahāyāna Buddhist meditation, to generate the *bodhicitta*, one must systematically train the mind to perceive all beings as one's mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, and arouse towards them boundless loving-kindness and great compassion, until such a perception becomes natural and spontaneous. This is not at all easy. I read that the Dalai Lama has said that he himself has experienced the real *bodhicitta* only a few times, for a few moments each time, so this gives us some idea of how difficult such an achievement must be. It can't be won just by casually engaging in a little social service and then convincing oneself that one has aroused

the *bodhicitta*.

It is true that the bodhisattva vows to work for the welfare of others in a broader way than the follower of the *śrāvaka* vehicle, but all such efforts are superficial if they are not motivated and supported by the true *bodhicitta*. Besides generating the aspirational *bodhicitta*, the bodhisattva must apply the *bodhicitta* through the practice of the six *pāramitās* and other great bodhisattva deeds of self-abnegation. The *pāramitās* begin with *dāna-pāramitā*, the perfection of giving. Social engagement can certainly be included under this category, as it involves giving others material gifts and the gift of security. But these gifts, as worthy as they are, do not equal in value the gift of the Dharma, for the gift of the Dharma leads to the permanent extinction of suffering. To be qualified to give this gift requires skills that go beyond social service.

The next spiritual perfection is *sīla-pāramitā*, the perfection of morality, and social engagement can be included under the morality of altruistic action, acts that benefit others. While engaged in social service, a bodhisattva must also practice patience — patience in enduring difficult conditions, patience in enduring disregard and abuse from others; so he is fulfilling *kṣānti-pāramitā*, the perfection of patience. And the work of social service demands energy. This helps to fulfill the *vīrya-pāramitā*, the perfection of energy. Thus social engagement can contribute towards the fulfillment of four of the six *pāramitās*.

But the bodhisattva must also fulfill the *dhyāna-pāramitā* and the *prajñā-pāramitā*, the perfections of meditation and wisdom, and these two perfections require the adoption of a contemplative life style. The Prajñā-pāramitā Sūtras say that the *prajñā-pāramitā* guides and directs the other five *pāramitās*, and the other five *pāramitās* become "perfections" or transcendent virtues only when they are connected with *prajñā-pāramitā*. But *prajñā-pāramitā* can only be attained through contemplative practice, by seeking out a lifestyle similar to that of one seeking arahantship.

The early Mahāyāna sūtras, such as the Ugraparipcchā Sūtra, do not recommend that the novice monastic bodhisattva immerse himself in social work; rather, they point him to the forest and instruct him to devote his efforts to meditation. If we look at the history of Mahāyāna Buddhism, whether in India, China, or Tibet, we would see that the great Mahāyāna masters such as Nāgārjuna, Asanga, and Atīsha in India; Huineng, Zhiyi, and Xuancang (Hsuan Tsang) in China; Longchen, Gampopa, and Tsongkhapa in Tibet, were not renown for their engagement in social service, but for their accomplishments as philosophers, scholars, and meditation masters. The Buddha himself achieved the highest attainments in meditation. Since bodhisattvas aim to become Buddhas, it is only natural that they should perfect the meditative skills that are characteristic of a Buddha.

Although the motivation and philosophical basis for followers of the bodhisattva vehicle differ from that of followers of the *śrāvaka* vehicle, the lifestyles of the two are not very different. The popular images of the withdrawn, solitary arahant, and the gregarious, super-active bodhisattva are fictions. In real life, the two resemble each other much more than one would think. The arahants, and those who seek to attain arahantship, often work assiduously for the spiritual and material improvement of their fellow human beings. The bodhisattvas, and bodhisattva aspirants, often must spend long periods in solitary meditation cultivating the meditative skills that will be necessary for them to attain Buddhahood. They will also have to study all the doctrines and the paths of the *śrāvaka* vehicle, yet without actualizing those paths. The bodhisattvas will have to learn to enter the meditative absorptions, practice them, and eventually master them. They will have to contemplate the three characteristics of impermanence, suffering, and non-self. They will have to acquire the insight-knowledges into the three characteristics. They differ from *śrāvakas* in so far as a *śrāvaka* aims to use the insight-knowledges to attain realization of nirvāṇa. A bodhisattva will link his or her practice of the path with the *bodhicitta* aspiration, the bodhisattva vows, and the spirit of great compassion. Sustained by these supports, a bodhisattva will be able to contemplate the nature of reality without attaining realization of nirvāṇa until he or she has matured all the qualities that come to perfection in Buddhahood. Among these is the perfection of giving and the conferring of benefits on sentient beings. But the greatest gift that one can give is the gift of the Dharma, and the kindest benefit one can confer on sentient beings is teaching them the Dharma and guiding them in the Dharma. Though a bodhisattva can certainly engage in social service as an expression of his or her compassion, to reach the higher stages of the bodhisattva path the aspirant will require a different range of skills than is exercised in social engagement, skills that are closer to those possessed by the arahant.

9 Towards a healthy integration of the vehicles

In my own view, both paths (or vehicles) — the arahant path and the bodhisattva path — can be seen as valid expressions of the Buddha's teaching. However, they must both conform to certain formal criteria. In matters of principle, they must conform to such teachings as the four noble truths, the three characteristics, and dependent origination; and in matters of practice, they must embody wholesome ethics and follow the scheme of the threefold training in morality, concentration, and wisdom. Nevertheless, even when these criteria are fulfilled, we must further avoid any type of syncretism that leads to the denigration of the original teachings of the historical Buddha, regarding them as mere expedients or adaptations to the Indian religious climate of his

age rendered irrelevant by teachings arisen at a later period. The kind of tolerance that is needed is one that respects the authenticity of Early Buddhism so far as we can determine its nature from the oldest historical records, yet can also recognize the capacity of Buddhism to undergo *genuine* historical transformations that bring to manifestation hidden potentials of the ancient teaching, transformations not necessarily preordained to arise from the early teaching but which nevertheless enrich the tradition springing from the Buddha as its fountainhead.

When we adopt this approach, we can truly venerate those practitioners who work diligently to realize the final goal of the Dhamma here and now, to reach nibbāna, the extinction of suffering, by following the noble eightfold path to its very end. We can venerate those who glorify the teaching by showing that it truly leads to ultimate liberation, to the plunge into the unborn and unconditioned state, the deathless element, which the Buddha so often extolled, calling it the wonderful and marvelous, the peaceful purity, the unsurpassed liberation. Again, by taking this approach, we can also venerate those who vow to follow the compassionate route of the bodhisattva, and who make this vow as an act of supererogation, not because it is a necessary condition for their own true deliverance. We can revere and cherish their loving-kindness, their great compassion, their lofty aspirations, and their self-sacrificial service to the world. True Buddhism needs all three: Buddhas, arahants, and bodhisattvas. It needs Buddhas to discover and teach the path to liberation; it needs arahants to follow the path and confirm that the Dharma does indeed lead to liberation, adorning the teaching with examples of those who lead the purest holy life; it needs bodhisattvas to bring forth the resolve to perfect those qualities that will enable them at some point in the future, near or distant, to become Buddhas themselves and once again turn the unsurpassed Wheel of the Dharma.

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